The Candle in the Window

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anything he was told. But he never growed up.

They say there was something wrong about fastening a gate, just the other way 'round, that let the lost child out some way, and he wandered off. Somebody up in the mountains, where most of 'em can't read a signboard, if there was any there to read, saw the little feliow, and out of ignorance, started him home the wrong way—and he perished. Tobe has that mark, too; does everything backwards. I found that out when he put up a mail box, number 33, to please little P'like, because all the other children had mail-boxes. Tobe marked it ee., instead of 33.

They tell me, too, the neighbors do, that little Tully, as the Gabels call him, was found where somebody that didn't want him had left him—mebby just a tiny cub. I don't know the p'ticulars of that—but anyway, when he was found, Grandma Gabel just took him to her heart in place of her own boy lost about a quarter of a century before. It was then she picked up and left Kentucky for good and all, and came to Kansas—to forget. But you don't forget that way, gentlemen. You can't move away and leave your memories in the old house with the broken step-ladder, and the cracked fruit jars. And Grandma Gabel's heart stayed back in the mountains. And she is ever thinkin' of their purple tops, and the little grassy coves in the Blue Ridges.

But little P'like was the happiest kid on the upper Smoky the day that box was put up, though, as I say, they never had any mail that I didn't put into it myself for them. But that youngster never missed a day lookin' into it. Seemed like he was always longin' to get a letter from somewhere. And he'd get big-eyed and all excited, if he found an old circular, or something like that, in it, though he wasn't fooled by it at all. He was too blamed quick for that. But he could "p'like" it was something for his grandma from Kentucky, because he knew she loved the old Blue Grass country so. And when you think of the dry treeless little ranch hid back in the Smoky Hill valley, you can't wonder.

School was heaven to little P'like, and he licked up learnin' something wonderful. Seemed like I could just see his mind growin' every day. It was like watchin' a vine on a trellis, the knowin' way he had of reachin' out and catchin' on higher up like. He was just a little deserted foundlin' of a woodscalf, picked up in the Kentucky mountains, outside of the protection of the State Game Laws, and worth nothin' at all, if it hadn't seemed to a poor, ignorant, heart-broken woman he might sort of take the place of her own boy lost so many years before. And I knew pretty soon—because us rural mail carriers learns to look right through house walls on our routes and know what's inside of 'em—I knew he was, all unknowin', beginnin' to be a real light-bearer into that lonely little home on the ranch lost sight of in the upper Smoky hills. He took every single thing he learned in the schoolhouse along with him. And it wasn't only just his little First Reader, and the numbers. It was clean finger nails, and bowin' his head to say the Lord's Prayer, and the most amazin' scraps of information from listenin' to the older classes recitin', all openin' a new world to his big bright eyes and dreamin' soul.

THE teacher out in District 33—the farthest one on my route, it was—was a strange girl that nobody knew anything about. You remember, Abram, she come in here that fall one evenin' when the train was late, and left early the next mornin' for that school settlement; and as far as I know Star City never did see her again. But teachers of any kind was so scarce in 1917 on account of Red Cross, and high-grade pay for any-grade clerks in Washington—'specially teachers worth a darn for a district like that one up on the Smoky Hill, that they was only too glad to get anybody willin' to come to them. Nobody knew how long that war would hang on. The real smart ones was declarin' it couldn't end under ten years.

So when this girl wearin' one of these sorority pins, and carryin' a diplomy from some college, sort of dropped in from nowhere and offered to teach their school, District 33 took her as God's providence without a murmur. Her name was Ruth Ravenstow. She had big dark eyes, and about the prettiest hair I ever see. But her face was white as chalk. Never a bit of color in her cheeks, and never a smile on her lips, even when she was talkin' to the children that just adored her. Just a hard, white face, with no more show of feelin' in it than a marble woman. There wasn't no warmth of life about her, and yet she had that strange sort of what you call magnetism, that draws everybody in spite of themselves.

The schoolhouse they had then—it's just a pile of earth now—was an old soddy built back in the late seventies or early eighties—warm in winter, of course, as the soddies always was; and big enough, too, for they was only eleven children in District 33. P'like's mailbox was the same number, the only figures he knew when it was put up. He'd read them on the old soddy door the mornin' he started to school, and like every other ship of learnin' they stayed with him, and he used them. God's mercy was in it, too, but that comes later. Just a little sod school house and less'n a dozen children, but Miss Ravenstow was an angel of light to them eleven kids that winter. You can't begin to know how poor they were, and how few things there was in their hard, barren lives to give them pleasure. Miss Ruth had a little phonograph, the kind you can put into a hat box, and a stack of the sweetest song records you ever heard, all by real singers, too. Mebby she never did smile, but she had good taste, dainty and refined to the tips of her pretty white fingers. And she give them children the best things they'd ever know. Lord, how those hungry youngsters ate that music. Just never got enough of it. But it seemed to me that little P'like got the most of all of 'em out of it. Especially one record—"My Old Kentucky Home"—sung by a good rich baritone voice, full and sweet.

'Way back in October P'like worked out a plan to do his Christmas shopping early, but he never told me about it till nearly Christmas. He was a close-mouthed little tyke if there ever was one, and when he shut his lips in front of his tongue it was like one of them abalone shells closin' up.

You see, there's never any Santy Claus up that valley, 'specially in District 33. They do what they can for their children, even in the lean years, but it never is much at best. And Grandma Gabel hadn't no time out of her hard days' work, week after week, from Christmas to Christmas, to make anything for little Tully—and never a cent to spend buyin' him anything. You can't make holidays much of anything without them two necessities—time or money, or both. And after P'like started to school Tobe took to wanderin' off that fall, and his mother had to go huntin' for him through the canyon, and do all her work and her time was double full.

But how that old woman did love music, though she didn't sing any herself. Hard work bears down heavy on the singin' spirit if you add to it the memory of a lost child and the hopelessness of a living one. And little P'like, who could warble like a bird, never told her a word about the phonograph at school—he was odd that way, always had more inside of him than he'd let on about. But I found out later why he didn't tell her. She just loved to hear him singin' to her at her work, and he'd stand up before her and go clear through a song for her. But he kept it all to himself that he was learnin' a new one to spring on her singin'-hungry soul Christmas morning—his gift, you see, such as it was, but his best. And he'd picked out the song he loved best, "My Old Kentucky Home." His eyes would just shine like the stars reflected on the still Smoky waters when he'd tell me about it. And 'round in the deepest part of the canyon, where the walls run up awfully high, he'd have me stop still, and hear him sing it through. And he'd act out the way he was going to stand up before his grandma, Christmas morning, and do it, and her never dreamin' he knew the song she loved so well. Oh, boy! the joy that little critter did get out of the surprise he was plannin' seemed strange even to me who sees such a lot of the inside of the life out on the lonely rural ways us routers follows.

THAT fall I got closer to my folks than ever before, owin' of course to the war; and closer to Grandma Gabel through little P'like; and closer to Miss Ravenstow. She had begun to watch for me, too, but with the saddest face I ever see in all my life. Never any expectation in it, nor the merest line as if she thought I'd stopped to give her any mail, though I'd got the habit of stoppin' a minute every single day, even if I did know she wasn't lookin' for a letter. Except for such mail as comes to any teacher, nothin' ever come to her that fall. No postmark but Star City was ever on anything in her box; not a magazine, nor newspaper, nor nothin' but local ads from them that get the County Superintendent's directory, and blank reports to be filled out by teachers every month.

And yet I could see she was starvin' for something, if it wasn't a letter. That's why I stopped every day, hopin' I could help her find it. Little P'like seen it too. That was what his eyes was for—to see with. He used to watch her open her mail to find out if it made her glad at all. Appeared like he was just starvin' to see her smile once. And he seemed to know by a child's instinct it hadn't. It got on his mind terribly. For a girl that never did smile, day in and day out, it was queer how those children did love that teacher. And especially P'like, who worshiped her from the first day. She had put something so new and sweet into his poor dry little child-life over at the Gabel ranch.

"When things I want don't want me," he confided to me one afternoon, "why I just p'like they do come anyhow. I wish I had a phonograph for my grandma." He said it so wistful like. "But I haven't and I can't ever get one, and I'm never going to tell her there is one."

"Why mebby you can get one when you grow up, a big man, and you will help her to have a lot of things," I suggested to him, seeing clearly now why the little cub hadn't mentioned the phonograph at home.

"Won't I be like Tobe, and have to be looked after, too?" he asked wonderingly.

It hadn't ever occurred to him he could get above the kind of life he'd always known.

"Why, no, little boy, you won't ever be like Tobe. You'll grow up and know a lot, and be strong, and do a lot, and be a good boy and love a lot, too. And you'll take care of Grandma then, because she won't be as strong as she is now."

As I went on encouragin' him, you should have seen his eyes shine, and the new light in his round face.

"I'm going to do it, and I'll p'like I'm doing it every day. But now—" The longin' of the hour came back sorrowfully for a minute only, "I know what I'll do now. When I sing 'My Old Kentucky Home' for Grandma Christmas morning, I'm going to p'like I have a phonograph all my own. P'like I'm it playing the song for Grandma, instead of singing it to her while she fries flap-jacks for Tobe and me for our breakfast. She does that every Christmas morning for us. It's our Christmas gift."

"But I want something else," he went on, the tears filling his big eyes, "something that don't want me."

"What's that?" I asked.

"I want to p'like my teacher's happy, but I just can't because she isn't."

"Well, just pretend she is, play like it anyhow," I suggested.

P'like only shook his head, and shut his lips up tight in the stubborn way he had sometimes. But I knew he'd told the truth. And I knew, too, it was the first time in his little dream life he hadn't been able to imagine he had what he wanted.

Folks in District 33 was puzzled, too. They had tried every way to do their best for their teacher. They was so grateful to her for stayin' there, and them eleven kids, all learnin' so fast. But they couldn't do a thing for her. 'Long toward the holidays, though, they began to feel it more, and wonder if there wasn't some way to show their feelin's, and to make her more at home among 'em. But they never seemed to get a bit nearer to her at all. Might as well go out in the Star City cemetery and expect the lambs cut on babies' grave-stones to get off and gambol about, as to move that white-faced girl in the school house up there on the Smoky.

At her request they'd built a little lean-to room onto the side of the sod schoolhouse, and she lived in it all by herself. It seemed so unnatural for a smart pretty girl like her, that had had a college education, and been associated in a fraternity. There isn't one of the Star County girls ever went to college that didn't come back brimmin' with life, and doin' things, and makin' themselves felt every day in the week. But this girl was clear shut away from the world, walled in by the canyons of the upper Smoky Hill. However, as I say, us rural carriers come by and by to be more or less a part of the folks on our routes and Ruth Ravenstow wasn't no exception.

Tod didn't say it, but we who knew him could understand what that kindly face, and cheery smile must have meant to the lonely girl-hermit on his route.

JUST before Christmas, something, God knows what, made me stop at the school house one evening, on my way back to town. The children had all gone home and Miss Ravenstow was alone. We talked a little while and when I started to go I said sort of carelessly-like, "I'll try and bring you a letter tomorrow."

She looked up at me with her big dark eyes like she'd look me through, her face gettin' whiter every minute, then she said slowly: "There is no letter to come, Mr. Witherspoon. Nobody who could write to me knows where I am. I can neither help, nor be helped anywhere."

"But you'd oughtn't bury yourself while you are still alive." I couldn't help sayin', me bein' old enough to be her father, "and there ain't nobody in the world so alone they can't be worth something to somebody else. When Christmas eve comes we ought to put candles in our winders as a sign we still remember what the night means to the world."

"What will it mean to the world the twenty-fifth of the December of 1917? The world was never so full of hate before. And who would see my candle out in this far away place if I should light one?"

You can't imagine, gentlemen, how hard and dreary, and hopeless, a voice as soft as that girl's could be.

"I guess I'm kind of an old-style codger, Miss Rvenstow, but may I say that they's One who always sees, the Good Bein' who never forgets even a good-for-nothin' little lost sparrer. I do sort of wish you'd try it for your own sake. It might make you a little speck happier," I insisted.

Her face was set and cold-like, and there was the strangest sort of hunted, hurt look in her eyes, but her voice was low and gentle as she said:

"I thank you for your kindness, Mr. Witherspoon. It was very good of you to think enough about me out here to stop and say this to me. I know you are sincere in your faith, and it makes you happy. Good-night."

Mebby some of you men could have gone further with her. McCullen, you know how to plead cases. You'd know what to follow up with. I didn't. That was all I could do. But her look haunted me all the way back to town that night. I could see her eyes every way I turned. Every shadow by the trail seemed to hold her face, white, with them great dark eyes. I knew then there was a slow-growin' desperation in them that I couldn't mistake, no matter how hard I tried to put it out of my mind.

They was hardly any show of the season's regular spirit of good-will in the upper Smoky valley that year. You all remember 1917, closin' with war clouds black around us though we was so many thousand miles away from them rain-sogged, blood-blackened fields of France. May the good Lord protect this world from ever seein' the same again. And may the good sense of the U. S. A. help Him to boost things so it won't.

Tod paused a moment and stared at the lobby floor, but not a man moved or spoke. We were all with him back in that time his story was painting for us.

Three days before Christmas I left my cart down by the corner and run up through the canyon to the Gabel's with little P'like. There wasn't no use for me to try to drive through the canyon over that rough trail. And as I told you it was a shorter way to the shack of a house hid behind the hills. The dark was droppin' down fast that night, it was just about the winter solstice, you know, the shortest day of the year. And I felt sort of uneasy about the boy goin' up there alone in the deepenin' dark. But I needn't of, for his bright eyes wasn't in his little button-head for nothin'. He could see better'n an owl any night in the year. As we turned out of the deepest pocket of the canyon he caught sight of Tobe Gabel wanderin' off down where I know I'd never seen him myself.

Tobe had started out to meet us, and as usual, with his poor twisted mind, about directions and everything, he went the wrong way. By

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MERRY CHRISTMAS TO ONE *and* ALL

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